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*Respectable Femininity Track*

*S. Mavin and G. Grandy*

**Respectable Femininity and Intra-gender Regimes of Regulation:  
Experiences of Women Elite Leaders**

**Summary**

This paper focuses upon how respectable femininity, an ideological construct reflecting a set of behavioural norms, plays out for women elite leaders in UK organizations within a context of competitive masculinity. Historically, respectable femininity reflects norms from the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> centuries with expectations of women dressed modestly, showing self-restraint, sober and well mannered (Fernando and Cohen, 2013) and is achieved by meeting prevailing rules of behaviour and appearance (Skeggs, 1997). We extend emerging research into modern day respectable femininity in Sri Lanka (Fernando and Cohen, 2013) and in India (Radhakrishnan, 2009). Analysis highlights how women elite leaders live within paradox; negotiating the inherent masculinity of elite leader and expected femininity of wider societal culture and surfaces the interplay between respectable femininity and gendered expectations of the elite leader role. We offer dynamic *regimes of intra-gender regulation* as women self regulate and regulate other women's bodies against constructions of respectable femininity.

## **Respectable Femininity and Intra-gender Regimes of Regulation: Experiences of Women Elite Leaders**

### **Introduction**

This paper explores how respectable femininity plays out for women elite leaders. Women elite leaders are both One and the Other (De Beauvoir, 1949) at the top of organizational hierarchies; they have broken through the glass ceiling and achieved a ‘masculine strategic situation’ (Tyler, 2005, p.569). However women’s under-representation at senior levels worldwide continues; women elites continue to be marginalized and there remains a lack of research into their experiences (Terjesen *et al.*, 2009). Women elite leaders accumulate privilege through hierarchical positioning but this is juxtaposed with social disadvantage based on gender (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014). Further women’s doing of elite leadership as a minority renders them highly visible and open to scrutiny, particularly their bodies and appearance (Sinclair, 2011). Doing leadership therefore is not a matter of ‘having a body and taking it into an organization, it is about creating and experiencing our bodies, careers and lives, through ‘embodied participation with others’” (Bell & Sinclair, 2014: 270). Following Krane *et al.* (2004) we argue that women elite leaders live within paradox and negotiate at least two cultures: that of the elite leader role which is inherently masculine and where they are ‘sometimes privileged’ (Atewologun and Sealy, 2014) and the wider societal culture where they are socially disadvantaged and femininity is expected from women. Therefore women elite leaders are an interesting ‘site’ to explore research into respectable femininity.

Respectable femininity has been historically associated with the intersection of class and gender and is an ‘an ideological construct leading to a set of behavioural norms commonly likened to the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Radhakrishnan, 2009), where respectable women dressed modestly (Whitehead 2005), demonstrated self-restraint (Whiteside, 2007), were sober and well mannered and confined themselves to mainly private spheres (Thorpe, 1996)’ (Fernando and Cohen, 2014, p.1). Our research interest is in exploring how versions of this respectable femininity play out for women in organizations while making sense of women elite leaders’ experiences. Following Radhakrishnan, (2009), respectability is considered a key component for women elite leaders in being socially privileged professional women. Cole and Zucker (2007, p.1-2) contend that ‘many women experience pleasure or power from behaviours associated with femininity, particularly associated with appearance (Black, 2004)’; however, such activities can simultaneously be experienced as efforts to meet a frustratingly exacting ideal. Further, Griffin *et al.* (2009) in a study of young women, argue that the challenge that modern day ‘ladettes’ pose to respectable femininity rests on their apparent display of practices associated with masculinity. Women elite leaders pose similar challenges by holding senior positions in organizations historically held by men and by doing gender (masculinities) differently (Mavin and Grandy, 2013). Yet as women, they are simultaneously subjected to expectations of a respectable femininity reflective of today’s society. So how do women elites experience this paradox? How does respectable femininity play out for women elite leaders?

We explore respectable femininity through women’s bodies and appearance at work, underpinned by the assumption, following Cole and Zucker (2010), that femininities and masculinities are premised on difference, alongside a cultural imperative that women should not resemble men: that women are concerned and put effort into their appearance and are scrutinized for how they meet appearance norms. Women leaders’ are problematic; their bodies are sites for social construction and becoming, with body ‘rules’ for femininity learned through bodily discourse (Bordo, 1989) and ‘codes of behaviours to which women must

subscribe' (Trethewey, 1999, p.425). These codes of behaviours of respectable femininity can be recognized in gendered discourses as that which is 'quite literally written upon members' bodies in ways that often constrain and sometimes enable women's professional identities' (Trethewey, 1999, p.423).

In this paper we focus on data drawn from a wider qualitative study of 81 women elite leaders' experiences at the top of hierarchies in UK organizations and illuminate their struggles with the unwritten rules and gendered expectations of respectable femininity within a context of competitive masculinity (Chesterman *et al.*, 2005). Our aim is to explore *how respectable femininity plays out for women elite leaders*. Making sense of women's experiences through a lens of respectable femininity offers an opportunity to extend Radhakrishnan's (2009) contention that constructions of respectable femininity may be rewarded or sanctioned and to further understand the gender boundaries which construct women elite leaders' intra-gender relations with other women. We begin by outlining respectable femininity, research into bodywork in organizations and our research approach. We then present *regimes of intra-gender regulation* interpreted from women leaders' accounts. Intra-gender regulation reflects how women elite leaders' self regulate and regulate other women's bodies and appearance against their interpretations of respectable femininity while simultaneously maintaining boundaries of the symbolic order in organizations.

### **Gender, Femininity and Respectable Femininity**

We view gender as socially constructed; recognizing that women's negative intra-gender relations take place within, not separated from, gendered contexts (Doldor *et al.*, 2012) and that patriarchy as socio-structural practices (Walby, 1989) provides the backcloth to gendered relations. This is expressed through hegemonic masculinity which maintains the masculine symbolic order and constructs a hierarchy of masculinities, where some remain more 'socially central, or more associated with authority and social power' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.846). Engaging with patriarchy limits the femininities deemed to be appropriate for women to gendered stereotypes which Connell (1987, p.228) suggests are 'emphasized femininities.' Here women elites manoeuvre gendered double binds, whereby they are expected to perform femininities associated with 'woman' whilst also demonstrating masculinities expected of those in elite positions' (Mavin *et al.*, 2014, p.4).

Like gender, femininity is socially constructed and 'a standard for women's appearance, demeanor, and values' (Bordo, 1993). Femininity changes over time, with multiple permutations and 'acceptable' femininity may be perceived differently on the basis of, for example, race and sexual orientation (Chow, 1999)' (Krane *et al.*, 2004, p.316.) – or as we contend, on the basis of organizational position. Cole and Zucker (2007) outline how the cultural practices and ideologies associated with femininity reflect a gendered power structure where women are subordinate to men, and some women attain higher status than others through successful enactments of a prescriptive set of normative feminine behaviours. They argue that consequently, 'all women necessarily engage with this feminine ideal as they construct and perform gender' (Cole and Zucker, 2007 p.1). We recognize a privileged, or hegemonic, form of femininity constructed within a White, heterosexual, and class-based structure with strong associations to heterosexual sex and a strong emphasis on *appearance* communicating a dominant notion of an ideal feminine body (Krane *et al.*, 2004). Cole and Zucker (2007) explore the domains of hegemonic femininity (feminine appearance, feminine traits or demeanour, and traditional gender role ideology), highlighting how Black women create and maintain a feminine appearance; placing a greater emphasis and investment in their appearance including clothing, grooming, and public elements of 'doing' femininity.

We propose that this hegemonic femininity is evident in modern day respectable femininity providing behavioural norms. Historical examples of respectable femininity include 'lady' as a dominant discourse with etiquette guides emerging in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Allen, 2009). These guides construct 'the figure of the middle class lady as a way of policing and maintaining classed and gendered boundaries' (Allan, 2009, p.146). Skeggs (1997) also suggests that women in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries could 'prove' their respectability through conduct and appearance. For this current study our understanding of respectable femininity is as follows:

Respectable femininity is an ideology which communicates that a respectable woman is highly regarded, well thought-of, decent, reputable and accepted, as evaluated against subjective and fluid expectations of what it is to be a 'proper' idealised feminine woman. This femininity is socially constructed and presents a standard for women's bodies and appearance, demeanour, and values. Respectable femininity is recognized when women present as decent, moral, respectful of norms and as having decorum (correctness, good behaviour, demureness).

As 'feminist theorists have long argued that respectability and (sexual) reputation form key dimensions of contemporary femininity' (Griffin *et al.*, 2009), we propose that 21<sup>st</sup> century constructions of respectable femininity may play out through women's embodiment of leadership, specifically through bodies and appearance.

Whitehead's (2005) approach to respectable femininity identifies how women teaching recruits in the 1920s embodied a certain, prescribed form of morality e.g. young women were advised to dress neatly and suitably to maintain respectable femininity, which in turn restricted their identities. However, respectability' is mainly absent in current Western management research (with notable exceptions e.g., Fernando and Cohen, 2013; Radhakrishnan, 2009). Radhakrishnan's (2009) recent study of professional women in India highlights how women presented themselves as culturally appropriate yet modern with the 'right' amount of freedom, conforming to appropriate sexual behaviours and striking a balance between work and family. Radhakrishnan understands this as 'respectable femininity,' enacted 'through a discourse of balance, restraint, and knowing the limit' and 'idealised femininities' (2009, p.211). Radhakrishnan argues that while this mode of femininity is rewarded, 'alternative femininities' are sanctioned. Fernando and Cohen (2013) in their study of respectable femininity in Sri Lanka argue that Radhakrishnan does not explain 'alternative femininities,' how the sanctions operate or the possible career implications of women's respectable behaviour. Fernando and Cohen (2013) make two key contributions to respectable femininity research: 1) empirical evidence which highlights how Sri Lankan women account for 'respectability' in their career enactment, in that demonstrating good moral behaviour is vital in winning respect from colleagues and superiors (Whitehead, 2005) and is crucial to their survival in organizations and to their career progress. 2) Illustrations of norms of respectability with the potential to impact on highly skilled Sri Lankan women's career agency in terms of their capacity to network and engage in influence behaviours.

Fernando and Cohen, (2013) argue that old concepts and imperatives do not disappear out of people's lives but rather are played out in new ways. Today women are achieving elite leader positions and find themselves in the symbolic order, a language mediated order of culture involving perpetuation of the law of the father through ideologies, structures and social culture, and within a masculine strategic prerogative, while at the same time women

elites are subject to expectations of femininity. Therefore how does respectable femininity play out for women who are both One and Other in elite leader positions? We contribute to management research into respectable femininity through an exploration of women's accounts of intra-gender relations with other women. We offer further understandings of how respectable femininity plays out for women elite leaders as they navigate the unwritten rules of respectable femininity and masculine gendered expectations of the leader role.

### **Women's Bodies and Appearance at Work**

Respectable femininity for women elite leaders who are both part of the masculine symbolic order as the One and as women marginalized as the subordinate Other, is complex, challenging and illuminated through women's bodies and appearance. For example, Kelan (2013) outlines how at work the suit is the appearance that signals professionalism, yet norms of women's business dress are less clear. Women's bodies and appearance in organizations make a statement not only about their respectability as professionals but also how they position themselves in relation to 'ideal masculinity and femininity within the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004)' (Kelan, 2013, p.46) and by our extension is a process of negotiation between respectable femininity and expectations of the elite leader role. Indeed women aim to control their maternal bodies in line with professional norms of bodily comportment (Gatrell, 2013), interpreted here as expectations of respectable femininity. This is in contrast to men who are seen as cerebral beings, in control of both body and mind (Gatrell, 2013).

Through a study of women in accounting and law, Haynes (2012) presents how women find it difficult to identify and negotiate the nature of professional demeanour, dress, appearance and self presentation as the culture and embodied identity of professional services firms (like senior leader positions) remains inherently masculine. In the study, women's bodies are subjected to a controlling masculine rationality manifested through embodied characteristics in relation to voice, weight and self-presentation which 'become crucial in constructing and legitimating hierarchical and in-egalitarian evaluations of worth in professional services firms' (Haynes, 2012: 502). This illustrates the tensions between the norms of masculine professionalism in senior positions and expectations of respectable femininity for women elite leaders.

Furthermore, the complexities of women's body work are even more problematic in intra-gender relations between women; intra-gender competition and negative relations can manifest through assessments of bodies and appearance and in doing so undermine assumptions of solidarity and opportunities for homosociality between women (Mavin *et al.*, 2013). Trethewey's (1999) research on women and professional bodies indicates that women's intra-gender relations are an area ripe for further investigation. In terms of 'disciplining' women's bodies, Trethewey contends that the 'female gaze' (p.445) was as powerful a normalizing force as the 'male gaze' (p.431) (in terms of expectations espoused and enacted by men towards women at work).

To summarize our discussions, we have argued that a woman's reputation and standing as an acceptable, well thought-of, decent and acceptable elite leader can be illuminated through her body and appearance as sources for evaluation of her performance as a decent, moral and demure respectable woman.

We contend that a study of women elite leaders, learning to navigate and discipline their own and other women's bodies and appearance through 'complex, ambiguous and precarious in-betweens of masculinity/femininity, revealing/hiding one's body, conservative fashionable dress, social conformity/individual creativity and sexuality/asexuality' (Tretheway, 1999, p.426) is important to make sense of women's experiences and extend understandings of respectable femininity.

### **Research Approach**

The research is a part of a wider project exploring women elite leaders' relationships with other women at work. We draw upon the traditions of qualitative research and adopt a constructionist approach. Following Denzin and Lincoln (2000) we contend that individuals continually construct and negotiate meanings to make sense of their experiences. Through conversations with participants, stories about work are co-constructed and re-presented as partial, retrospective accounts of their experiences, intertwined with the researchers' own lived experiences (Dick and Cassell, 2004). Following Stead and Elliot (2012), our perspective supports relational and socially situated understandings in that it encourages views of intra-gender relations between women as dynamic participation in social practices within particular historical and social contexts, such as organizational gendered contexts.

Data was collected by three research assistants (RAs). A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate exploration into a similar range of topics across participants as they were asked about their experiences of social relations with other women (e.g. life/career history, experiences as a woman moving into elite positions including friendship, competition, cooperation and ambition), while also allowing the participant and interviewer flexibility around the depth and breadth of topics. Interviews with 81 women working in UK organizations were conducted: 36 Executive Directors/Non-Executive Directors in FTSE 100/250 companies and 45 elite leaders identified as 'influential' in an annual regional newspaper supplement about the 'top 250/500 influential leaders'. Participants held formal positions with significant institutional and hierarchical power within a private or public organization and were thus considered elite leaders. The participants were aged between 33-67 years; 73 self declared as white British/Irish/Other white backgrounds, two black/mixed backgrounds, with six non-declared; 62 women worked full time; 14 part time with five non-declared. Interviews lasted on average 90 minutes. These were recorded, transcribed, anonymized, coded and returned to participants for approval and further reflective thought to enhance the 'trustworthiness' of the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The women identified their own codes to protect anonymity but are identified here using pseudonyms.

The analysis and the theoretical development were marked by experiencing surprises in the empirical data and an ongoing back-and-forth between data analysis and theory to explain unexpected findings (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Analysis of women's responses and cross-transcript analysis was highly iterative, moving between 'phases of coding, literature review, and conceptualization of the data' (Ladge *et al.*, 2012, p.1456). The first author led on initial interpretations of the women leaders' accounts, developed broad themes and held post data collection discussions with the RAs to explore whether the initial themes resonated with their reflections on the data they collected. All wrote reflexive accounts of their experiences as women interviewing women elite leaders which informed the discussions. All talked about being in awe of: the women's power presence; the positions they held and feeling privileged to have access to such women.

The interpretative analysis of data discussed here was based on three broad themes of erotic capital, competition and female misogyny. In joint interpretative discussions, the authors discussed how they were unsettled and intrigued by participants' references to 'body work' (our term, not participants) as part of their experiences. True to the emergent nature of qualitative research, these participants were not asked about body work; rather it emerged through their accounts. A more refined joint analysis over a number of months was performed. Particularly vivid was the sense of struggle and boundary monitoring pertaining to women's embodiment; body and appearance.

In their accounts, the women leaders simultaneously embraced, rejected and neutralized particular constructions of femininity and masculinity through appearance. Moreover, participants engaged in a monitoring of the boundary of respectable femininity for themselves, as well as transferring it onto other women leaders in intra-gender relations. At this point in the analysis process, the extant literature on body work and respectable femininity was reviewed to help make sense of our interpretations. Further analysis across transcripts led us to develop and refine several themes, referred to here as gendered regimes of intra-gender regulation which reflect women's manoeuvring of subjective constructions of respectable femininity and masculine expectations of elite leader positions. We now move to discuss the themes which illuminate ways in which women engage in self and other regulation against constructions of respectable femininity.

### **Constructions of Respectable Femininity: Women's Regimes of Intra-gender Regulation**

The women elite leaders described a variety of ways through which they self-regulated and regulated other women's bodies and appearance against constructions of respectable femininity. Specifically this was in terms of whether women felt that their own bodies and appearance, as well as those of other women, met their constructions of 'proper' femininity, within the dynamic as both One and Other. Further, whether women's bodies and appearance met appropriate standards of demeanour; were respectful of norms and demonstrated decorum, modesty, correctness and respectability – in whatever ways the women construct as the correct etiquette for elite leader positions. The various ways that women elites engage in self-other regulation reflect attempts to maintain and negotiate respectable femininity through the body and appearance while simultaneously keeping intact the boundaries of symbolic order in organizations. Whether conscious or outside of conscious awareness, the women strive to embody through their bodies and appearance that they are decent, reputable and dignified women through what we interpret as regimes of regulation. The women elites often construct regimes of regulation in comparative terms to the efforts of Other women which can lead to negative comparisons of women who do not meet expectations of respectable femininity. In what follows we discuss four regimes of regulation: *Mirror Mirror on the Wall*, *On the Borders of Disgust*, *The Beauty Premium* and *I'm Not That into It*.

#### *Mirror, Mirror on the Wall*

The women elite leaders possess an awareness of being evaluated by others on the basis of their bodies and appearance. As such they are aware that their own (or that of other women's) body and appearance can threaten standards of respectable femininity. This awareness leads to efforts to evaluate themselves through the reflection of others. Constructions and related expectations of respectable femininity do not arise solely from relations with other women; relations with others (men) and broader macro forces also contribute to the struggle women face with regards respectable femininity through the body and appearance.



We begin with Sarah who illuminates this reflective process of women evaluating women based on bodies and appearance. Sarah describes another woman elite leader whom she perceives to evaluate women by what they wear, rather than the position they hold. Sarah also generalizes such efforts to other women when she refers to 'expected female behaviour'.

There's a woman who's... in the [name of sector] who's quite high up in her area. And it's kind of totally absolutely expected female behaviour. Where you know someone's not looking at you professionally but they're looking at what you're wearing and how your behaviour is... [against respectable femininity norms] and you don't want people to think anything of you that isn't complimentary [for not being correct in how you look]. So you always wonder 'well is there a reason that person acts like that? Was there a reason they feel I'm like that?' [Am I not meeting expectations?]. (Sarah)

Sarah perceives that other women evaluate her on the basis of appearance and in doing so she reveals a desire to be viewed positively by others; to be viewed as reputable, demonstrated through her appropriate appearance and therefore respectability. This reveals Sarah's struggle and feelings of self-doubt ('was there a reason they feel I'm like that?').

Women elites discuss how despite feeling 'competent' in their jobs they are criticized unfairly because of some perceived weakness or flaw in their bodies or appearance, therefore failing to meet expected standards of respectable femininity. Martha expresses that any successful evaluation as an elite leader and as a woman, requires a woman to pay attention to her 'image' as much as it does to 'the substance' of the task or skills necessary. She is confident in what we perceive to be her technical abilities to perform the work ('harder to get me at the substance') but less sure of her efforts to appear proper or respectable as a woman in a leader role (her image). Again Martha illuminates participants' awareness of being observed, evaluated and critiqued based on the body and appearance as a woman and the associated struggle as a woman elite leader.

Undeserved criticism is even silly things like the dress I was wearing or something like that. It's always easier to catch a woman on other issues than just the substance and certainly in my case it's harder to get me at the substance than to get me at the image. (Martha)

In a similar way, Brenda reveals how determining the 'right' balance of femininity in an elite leader role can be tricky and that expectations around the body and appearance are different for women and men. Understanding what is proper, decent and respectable femininity as it relates to the body and appearance is not always clear, but it is essential; if they do not always get it 'right', women leaders are placed in a precarious situation where they risk being viewed as improper, disrespectful, abnormal or out of place.

Things they wouldn't dream of saying to men. I remember one interview I went to where somebody said to me oh you're not very sparkly today and you don't look, you don't look that good. They wouldn't have dreamt of saying that to one of the men competitors, ooh you're not very sparkly today. It was very upsetting, some of the things said like that. And you always had to pay much more attention to your appearance. Because you were liable to be criticised for it I think. (Brenda)

Many of the women frame their expectations of respectable body and appearance in a mirror image type process in relation to other women. They recount stories of other women who display respectable femininity and serve as a benchmark, or those that get it 'wrong'; are 'improper' and who raise questions or judgments around what are appropriate displays of the feminine body and appearance. While expressing empathy for the possible reasons for her colleague's choice to dress in a 'masculine' manner, Janice disapproves of the 'boyish haircut' and 'male suit'. She implies that the appropriate embodiment should be more natural and feminine ('we just dress as we turn out') and adds strength to her opinions of appropriate 'dress' by phrasing it as a view that she and other women share, thereby constructing a shared norm that her colleague violates in some way.

She's [colleague] an interesting example because she even dresses in a very male way, she always wears a male suit, she's got a very boyish haircut and she's got a lovely face that works with that sort of haircut but it did strike me when I met her that ...if I just could talk to you longer, pluck up the courage to say 'why are you wearing a...is it deliberate?' And partly it's because she's worked for the [name of department] and because of her [name of profession] background. I don't think those of us that work in [type of organisation] feel that, we just dress however we turn out but perhaps she's had to do that and that's become her personality stamp. But it's interesting isn't it that she's felt that she's had to do that. (Janice)

We contend that women are suspect to the reflections of a multi-pane mirror; they experience pressures from various sources to conform to particular notions of respectable femininity through their body and appearance in order for them to hold and maintain a position of respectability as a woman elite leader. While exact performative expectations are less clear, the women reveal a desire to self-regulate and regulate other women's bodies and appearance to ensure they are 'correct' and 'proper'; expectations related to constructions of respectable femininity within a masculine symbolic order.

### *On the Borders of Disgust*

In managing respectable femininity, women elite leaders re-construct various means through which 'it' is maintained, negotiated or threatened via the body and appearance. Through such policing we argue that the women leaders are attempting to maintain dignity and self-worth, and when body and appearance performances fall outside of the somewhat ambiguous boundaries of respectability, the woman are suspect to disgust and a loss of status and respect, as a leader and a woman.

Tonia expresses that while emphasizing femininity through flirting at work might secure some advantage in certain circumstances, it comes with the risk of retaliation from colleagues who perceive that they have been negatively affected by such efforts. The overall risk to self-worth and respectable femininity is substantial, so much so that we view these women as *flirting with fire*, positioning themselves at the borders of disgust and disrespect.

I think I have witnessed in the past women trying to use the feminine... side of being a woman a little bit to their advantage; they're doing a bit of flirting and all the rest of it. ... That can work quite well when they're quite junior, you know a little bit. And then they suddenly find out that it doesn't... they're not taken as seriously. Now I'm not saying that you come in wearing a hair shirt... and not being a woman. I am a woman in the office - I'm not a pretend man. I walk... with my nail varnish and all the rest of it ... that perhaps a [name of senior role] might talk to them for five minutes... it's not because the more senior people will start pigeonholing them and their peers will really resent them. I mean when a load of men think that they're being - twenty five year old chaps think that they're being sidelined by a twenty five year old woman because the woman's wearing a short skirt, they will find a way to pay her back. (Tonia)

Tonia implies that respectable femininity does not entail 'denying' femininity and that 'nail varnish' and being 'a woman in the office' is acceptable and appropriate. Yet there are boundaries to emphasizing femininity that if crossed, result in the woman not being taken seriously by others as a woman leader at work. Emphasizing inappropriate femininity through flirting and the consequence of not being taken seriously raises questions as to the extent to which the violator of the norm is able to maintain control of herself and thus her dignity is threatened. Sayer (2007, p.569) argues that dignity is 'associated with seriousness and being taken seriously... if they are serious but are never taken seriously by others, it is hard for them to maintain their dignity and self-respect.' Maintaining dignity is relational and depends on 'how we conduct ourselves and whether others accord us respect for this' (Sayer, 2007, p.568).

Other women engage in *fat talk* as they evaluate respectable femininity, highlighting how weight is related to competence and respect as a woman leader. Being overweight or putting on weight is a weakness. It signals a lack of control of one's body, of femininity, and of work. Mary's comments exemplify how she perceives weight to be associated with dignity, worth and competence as a woman leader.

But if you stand up in a conference, is the first thing that somebody's going to say 'oh she's a bit overweight'? ...Is that how they judge their successes? So if they are then blown away by what you say, is it a surprise to them because oh, I didn't realise fat people could say good things. Or fat women. ...And I do think that is really, really sad and I think that is really true. ... When you go to a room full of [name of senior role] I think that's the first thing people do. They look around and they will say oh her hair looks awful. The fact that she's an [name of senior role] ... oh, she's put on weight hasn't she? And if she - and the people who have put on weight, God, that is real weakness. (Mary)

While it is less clear from Mary's comments if she is revealing her own struggle or directing her comments to other women in an attempt to regulate their femininity, being perceived to be overweight or not in control of one's weight affects self-worth and respect from others. A focus on the body (aesthetic) and not the person (embodiment) reduces the individual to less than a 'normal' person, stigmatizing them. The work of Douglas (1966) on dirt and disgust offers insight in that dirt is understood as socially constructed and matter ('material or symbolic') which is out of place and evokes feelings of fear and disgust. Dirt is associated with morality; in that 'false' dichotomies such as clean/dirty and pure/impure underpin our meaning making; that which is perceived to be dirty, in material or symbolic terms, also raises questions around moral/immoral.

‘The female body is at odds with ‘the hetero-normative masculine impermeable idealized body’ (Russell, 2013, p.83) and therefore inferior, less pure, less clean and ‘a boundary under threat’ (p.86) which requires ongoing regulating. Overweight bodies associate with contamination, perceptions of disgust and related feelings such as lack of dignity, shame, mistrust, and humiliation. However the feminine body is always out of place in the masculine symbolic order, regardless of perceptions of respectable femininity. Women elite leaders’ accounts resonate with this line of thinking around disgust and as such lack dignity via the body and appearance. Both Helen and Lydia express how there is pressure to be appropriately groomed, otherwise they risk being ridiculed and criticized, which threatens their ability to maintain respectable femininity, threatening one’s dignity.

I think sometimes trying to be a superwoman puts a lot of pressure on you... And I think... the things that go are getting your nails done. I don’t have any nail varnish on today, but it is very rare that I don’t have my nails painted now. I always get my roots done quickly, quickly, and I went through years when I didn’t feel I had the time to lift my head up. Because that was the bit that fell off the end if there wasn’t enough time. (Helen)

This was one of the first times I’d tried to get a [name of senior role]. It was me trying my hand. They obviously saw me as a real threat and went for me and alongside that there were some amazingly catty remarks, some of which came back to me, including about my hair. I had a perm in those days, very fashionable... but it came back to me that this very senior man in [name of organisation] had gone around saying I wore a wig. (Lydia)

These women stand on the borders of disgust, always at risk because emphasized femininities, being overweight or being inappropriately groomed can result in perceptions of a lack of control and lack of respectability. Thus women leaders are pressurised to attain respectable femininity to be credible and in control as leaders but those who do not are perceived as out of control and ‘punished’ in certain ways, including loss of dignity, loss of respectability and loss of credibility.

### *The Beauty Premium*

When women elite leaders get the body and appearance ‘right’ and ‘look the part’ against standards of respectable femininity, feelings of autonomy and dignity are expressed. Through our analysis a beauty premium emerged whereby those who embody constructions of respectable femininity are rewarded. Rewards are reflected in some women’s accounts as feeling empowered, in control, feeling credible - respectable, confident in the leader role and therefore having dignity, or not having their dignity threatened, because their appearance is in balance with expectations. Denise illustrates this.

I think trying to look your best is something that I - I am not very tall and if I am going into battle I like to get stiletto heels on. I like big heels and I like lipstick and I will get my hair done, because to me appearance is part of it. I do that as well though if I have got something terribly important. If I want to make an impression. (Denise)

Going into ‘battle’ as a leader in ‘stiletto heels,’ putting on ‘lipstick’ and getting ‘hair done’ is ‘terribly important’ to Denise. Drawing from Russell (2013), this illuminates how ‘body boundaries are closely linked to the delineation of the physical outside of the body and to physical autonomy’ (p.89). Denise’s account shows how the physical (body and appearance) is linked to a sense of control and autonomy over her body in line with her construction of respectable femininity and reflects her embodiment of leadership and empowerment. Similarly, Shona describes a WEL who has ‘incredible clothes’ ‘brilliant figure’ and who can run downstairs in ‘really high heels.’ Shona gives the impression of a powerful in control attractive woman who she admires and who ‘really looks the part’ but it’s not for her.

I think someone... really look the part. ... She’s got incredible clothes, a brilliant figure for it and wears really high heels and all that. She really looks the part. I think that’s quite helpful sometimes... because people are impressed by... so first impressions and physical appearance is part of the picture and some women really are good at that and I quite admire it, almost because I could never do that. Red high heels are not me if I can’t walk and she can. She can run downstairs in them. It’s amazing.

For others, getting body and appearance right is a defensive move which serves as a threshold point by which a woman’s respectable femininity is less likely to be threatened or questioned. Anita identifies that the body and appearance serve to create and maintain liminal zones of respectable femininity.

You ain’t going to be an eighteen stone ballerina and you can’t go on with all your point shoes all torn and looking a mess. Looking the part is the way a pilot will have to look the part ... people take me at - not face value but who I am inherently and intrinsically, it’s a load of old bullshit because we’re very tactile, aesthetic people. We make a lot of split second judgements from the way people look and it’s not just look, its move, its talk, its eye movement and it happens fast and we judge each other quickly so these things matter. Even if it’s only... to create a level playing field. (Anita)

‘Looking the part’ against norms of respectable femininity is necessary for women leaders to create a level playing field and if the woman does not get it ‘right’ she risks judgment and criticism from others which may threaten her sense of self-worth, respectability and credibility.

### *I’m Not That into It*

For most of the women elites there is awareness, at a conscious or subconscious level, that their female body somehow puts them out of place; they experience ambivalence as it pertains to the body and appearance and this causes a reaction in the self and others (Russell, 2013). For some, this ambivalence is responded to through particular representations of embodiment that may serve to further transgress body boundaries and threaten respectable femininity. These women reject and deny certain performances of the idealized feminine woman via the body and appearance.

In rejecting certain normative respectable femininity expectations of the body and appearance, some women leaders position the performative choices of other women leaders as less desirable, less ‘authentic’ and inferior to their own approach.

Kimberly expresses tolerance for others' attempts to maintain respectable femininity through the body and appearance ('other people do it differently and ....that's fine'). She recognizes the dualistic choice open to women in maintaining respectability; femininity or masculinity. At the same time she privileges her refusal to follow accepted norms of 'making a statement' through her clothes, positioning her choices as difficult ('fight the idea') and therefore willing to make sacrifices in challenging the idealized respectable feminine woman.

And other people do it differently and I think that's fine if that's what...other women do, it helps their confidence I think to go for something statement in the way of clothes but for me it never worked... that idea and I do quite strongly fight the idea that somehow as a woman you have to do statement clothes. I think you can also go down the route of men which is be boring as hell and wear the uniform of dark things that nobody's going to notice much. (Kimberly)

In a similar way, Charlotte associates her rejection of normative expectations with authenticity. She acknowledges there may be consequences to her embodiment transgressing such body boundaries, yet she positions her approach as superior to those whom do 'try to hide' their 'real self' by conforming to pressures around the body and appearance to maintain respectable femininity within the masculine symbolic order.

I think you need to be authentic. ..and once in my career some man said to me you should wear less flamboyant clothes and basically my response to that was get stuffed, it's got nothing to do with you what I wear and I am who I am, I like dressing how I am and I will take the consequences of how I am and for me that's an important and genuine part of being me and I bring my whole self and I think it's really important for women to bring their whole self to work. They don't have to pretend that they don't have a family life or a social life or children or any of that. I think they try to hide it. (Charlotte)

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Women elites challenge traditional respectable femininity by achieving leader roles at the pinnacle of organizational hierarchies and therefore have in some ways appropriated masculinity as One and yet are the Other in the symbolic order. Through our exploration of women elite leaders' intra-gender relations with other women we have illuminated the various ways in which respectable femininity plays out. Women elites are under constant scrutiny and their recognition of the importance of respectable femininity in the leader role emerges in their accounts. The women identify with hegemonic femininity through feminine appearance, in that they create versions of feminine appearance in a dynamic of expectations of femininities and masculinities. Similar to Cole and Zucker's (2007) participants many women elite leaders place emphasis on and investment in their appearance including clothing, grooming, and public 'body' elements of 'doing' respectable femininity. Women elites simultaneously manoeuvre their own subjective constructions of respectable femininity with masculine expectations of elite leader positions within the symbolic order. They do so by drawing upon regimes of regulation to discipline women bodies and appearance which involve self-regulation and intra-gender regulation of other women. Extending Fernando and Cohen's (2013) study, women elites account for respectability through the body and appearance and doing respectability 'right' is the way to being a credible leader.

*Mirror Mirror on the Wall* as a regime of regulation outlines how there is no 'one' explicit version of respectable femininity in the accounts. However women elite leaders possess an awareness of the pressure to meet, as well as being evaluated against, unwritten, ambiguous standards of respectable femininity. Women struggle to meet these necessary standards as part of 'being' a respectable credible leader and recognize that their bodies and appearance place them at continual risk of non-compliance. We contend that women cannot be credible elite leaders in the masculine symbolic order without managing their bodies and appearance against subjective norms and behaviours required by respectable femininity.

From our analysis we have demonstrated how, through intra-gender regimes of regulation, women police other women's constructions of respectable femininity while struggling, manoeuvring, negotiating and balancing their own body and appearance against expectations of respectable femininity. How women elites regulate bodies and appearance reflects the discourse of balance, self restraint and knowing the limits of women's performances against respectable femininity identified in Radhakrishnan's (2009) study. Here following Fernando and Cohen (2014), women elites actively negotiate within rules of respectable femininity in maintaining career goals, effectively reproducing the rules in the process. This is exacerbated within a context where women are simultaneously part of the masculine symbolic order and marginalized at the top of organizational hierarchies.

Through intra-gender social relations between women, women elites privilege their own constructions of respectable femininity to attain higher status (Cole and Zucker, 2007) than other women. This is complicated by the ambiguity in constructions of femininity which emerged from women's accounts e.g. femininity is not to be exploited, to be too sexual, girly, masculine or mother-like; femininity should be neutralized yet femininity is powerful as battle dress. Emphasized femininities (Connell, 1987) and 'girly girl' hyper-femininity (Paechter, 2006) are not part of respectable femininity for women elites. In fact some women self-regulate and 'do' intra-gender regulation to avoid the taint of girly femininity (Griffin *et al.*, 2009) as elite leaders.

Fernando and Cohen (2013) question what alternative femininities are sanctioned and in what ways, in processes of respectable femininity (Radhakrishnan, 2009). In this study, women who present themselves in sexual ways or are 'too fat,' or fail to maintain bodies and appearance (e.g., nails and hair) *On the Borders of Disgust*, transgress boundaries of respectable femininity and are sanctioned by other women (and men) through disapproval, disgust and loss of status, dignity and respect as a leader - and a woman. However when women leaders embody standards of respectable femininity they are rewarded through *The Beauty Premium*; when body and appearance are 'right' they link to women's feelings of control, empowerment and dignity. A woman elite leader is perceived as credible when one which is glamorous (against standards of respectable femininity) *and* intelligent. Through *I'm Not that Into It*, some women elites disavow practices linked to traditional forms of femininity (Griffin *et al.*, 2009). The women who reject efforts to get the body and appearance 'right' are comfortable with their own authenticity and privilege their approach over other women through social processes of intra-gender regulation. There is no etiquette manual for women outlining how to 'do' respectable femininity as elite leaders however those guided by values of authenticity reject the notion of disciplining their bodies and offer space for challenge and disruption.

As a result of the empirical study and our discussions we have made contributions to the lacuna of research exploring respectable femininity and its influence on women elite leaders. We have highlighted how women elite leaders live within paradox in negotiating the inherent masculinity of the elite leader role and the expected femininity of wider societal

culture and have surfaced the interplay between respectable femininity and gendered expectations of the elite leader role. Our key contribution to respectable femininity research are dynamic regimes of self and intra-gender regulation which emerge through social relations between women, as ways in which respectable femininity plays out for women elite leaders. In focussing upon the intra-gender nature of social relations between women we also contribute to Trethewey's (1996) research into disciplining bodies and highlight how women's 'gaze' as regulation of bodies and appearance is as powerful a normalizing force as men's gaze in terms of the standards and norms of respectable femininity. Respectability is not spoken about explicitly in Western societies (Fernando and Cohen, 2013), however constructions of respectable femininity influence women's credibility as elite leaders and influence women's self-regulation and the regulation of other women through intra-gender relations. Talking openly about understandings of respectable femininity, in particular in Business School curricula, Executive education and coaching is a step forward in naming and challenging the gendered discourses which constrain our agency and our contribution to economic and social development. Such debates have potential to disrupt gendered discourses of women doing elite leadership and contribute to current debates on quotas for women on the board.

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